THE CARE OF THE EARTH

November 26, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Genesis 1:26-2:3
Matthew 5:1-5

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."
-Matthew 5:5 (RSV)

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," said Jesus. "Good," said Madeline L'Engle, "they're the only ones we can trust with the place." [The Irrational Season, p. 70-73]

Our celebration of Thanksgiving last Thursday remembered the Pilgrims who came to New England in the early part of the 17th century, endured a treacherous ocean crossing, a hostile wilderness, a brutally cruel winter and after one-half of them died, got a foothold; and when the meager first harvest was in, set aside a day for feasting and celebrating and giving thanks. They could do that because they trusted God to give them strength and courage, and they trusted nature to be generous and to provide for them. They were not theologically naive. They did not expect Thanksgiving baskets to be delivered daily. They buried their young and their old all during the winter. They measured out the grain they had brought along, cupful at a time, to get through the winter. They expected no intrusion of divine providence to alter the realities of their adventure. But they trusted nature. They knew that, by God's goodness, the world - given half a chance - would sustain them.

So, part of what we observe on the fourth Thursday of November is their faith and courage and grace, and part of what we observe is something the human race has been watching carefully since we first opened our eyes to the world around us and reached up for a piece of fruit dangling from a tree limb, namely the productivity of nature: An American Thanksgiving is partly a celebration of the pilgrims' courage and faith, and it is partly a Harvest Festival... a celebration of the basic kindness of nature, the willingness of nature to provide for us, to respond even to our urging by producing food to eat and clothing to wear and shelter to keep us warm. It is elemental. And it is that part of the equation which is radically different today. Put as simply as I know how, the willingness of nature to provide for human life is no longer a sure thing. Putting it a bit testily, we are, all the evidence tells us, winning the war we have been waging against nature. We are neutralizing, negating, defeating nature's basic inclination to provide for us. Why we are doing this in the face of

the overwhelming evidence, the mountains of data, why we are unwilling even to listen to the data, is a great mystery. It has to do with greed and arrogance and pride and that has to do with what Christians call sin, and it - the radical attack of the human race in the late Twentieth Century on its own environment - constitutes what everybody agrees is the single most urgent issue confronting us.

I love the zoo. One of the great advantages of the city is not only major league sports and world class music, it is that in a few minutes you can see a tiger, a gorilla family, an elephant... not a picture, but the real thing. Among my oldest fantasies are being able - whenever I want to - to see major league baseball, or a tiger. So I go frequently. Almost any excuse will do. I take out-of-town guests who don't particularly want to go. I take new born grandchildren and sometimes I go alone. And I look at those magnificent lowland gorillas and the tiger stalking his tiny prison cell waiting for the posh new quarters, and the elephant, and the wolves... and I always think... We... we who are alive now, in all likelihood, are the last people in history who will share the earth with these creatures.

We are the people who will finally succeed, after several centuries of all out effort, we will succeed in making their life in nature utterly impossible. They will survive, in a manner of speaking. We know how to do that now so that our great-grandchildren will be able to see them in zoos. But whether a tiger whose parents and grandparents never ran down an antelope and who has never seen the outside of a cage is still a tiger, is an interesting question. It is already too late for many of them, although there are good and admirable efforts underway to protect and even to put animals back in places where they have faced extinction. Maybe even wolves in Yellowstone again... but there are only a few hundred mountain gorillas left, none in captivity, and they probably aren't going to make it. The elephants who even made the cover of Time this fall are down from 120,000 in Kenya and Tanzania in 1970 to less than 20,000 in 1988... given the out-of-control population explosion and human unwillingness to deal with it, there will be no habitat large enough to sustain them ultimately... 11% of all the species of birds in the world face extinction... and a total of one-half million species of animals and plants will be gone forever by the end of the century. So we'll stock our zoos and hope for the best.

Does it matter? David Stockman, Director of the Budget a few years ago, was speaking to the National Association of Manufacturers one time and said: "I keep reading that there are 170 lakes dead in New York that will no longer carry fish. And it occurred to me to ask the question: How much are the fish worth? And does it make sense to spend billions of dollars controlling emissions from sources in Ohio - if you're talking about a very marginal number in dollar value, either in recreational terms or in commercial terms." [New York Times Magazine, 10/31/82]

Now, you may not agree with Stockman's aesthetics or priorities, but what about his question? It is the important one. Does it matter? So what if a few lakes die and the last gorillas and tigers? Can we make it without them? Can we live in a world envisioned by Lewis Thomas where the only animals besides ourselves are our dogs and cats... whose food and

paraphernalia already occupy ten percent of the supermarket shelf space, and the animals we farm for food and clothing? A Native American Tribal Chief wrote to President Franklin Pierce in 1855 - "What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts are gone, man would die from great loneliness of spirit." [Dallas County Audubon Society, DCAS, Inc. Conservation News and Issues. September 1987]

A new book published this fall is being widely read and discussed. The End of Nature by Bill McKibben. Mr. McKibben's fascinating thesis is that "we are at the end of nature. By this I do not mean the end of the world. When I say 'nature' I mean a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it."

One of those ideas, generally assumed by all, is that change in nature occurs very slowly, over hundreds of millions of years - so we really don't have to worry about them. That is no longer true, points out Mr. McKibben. In fact in three decades we have caused very significant changes in nature... The carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere has increased 10%. There is a lot of discussion about what will happen next, but no one argues that we have not fundamentally altered nature... An immense hole in the ozone layer opens above the South Pole every fall. There is argument about what that means, but no one argues that it doesn't happen.

Another basically wrong idea that we hold as truth is that the world is a very big place with lots of margin for error and self-correction. It's an idea that occurs to me every time I fly over the vast empty spaces in our own country... The world, I tell myself, is a big place: it can absorb an awful lot. Wrong, says Mr. McKibben. Life exists in a five and one-half mile layer of atmosphere... that's the distance from sea level to the top of Mt. Everest where the air is too thin to breathe. That's a space as big as from here up the Lake Shore to about Foster. "Into that tight space and the layer of ozone above it, are crammed all that is life and all that maintains life."

And into that tight space we are pouring carbon just as fast as we can.

"The average American automobile, driven the average American distance, 20,000 miles, in an average American year, releases its own weight in carbon into the atmosphere." That's not pollution. That's just what happens when we burn carbon fuel.

And the rain forests, the balancing mechanism - which use carbon dioxide and produce oxygen - are themselves being burned down, 70,000 square miles in one Brazilian state alone.

What's going to happen? Nobody knows, but there are plenty of studies which conclude that we are going to live in a significantly warmer atmosphere. A National Aeronautics and Space Administration computer model shows that Dallas will experience 78 days of 100 degree temperatures by the year 2,000 - up from the current nineteen. New York City, which has fifteen days above 90 degrees will have forty-eight. Fortunately, the computer didn't turn its attention to Chicago.

Mr. McKibben's point is that we are now part of nature. We have intruded. Nature is no longer independent. And that brings us to the philosophic or theological or spiritual dimension of the issue.

The Bible begins with a magnificent affirmation of God's creativity and humanity's role in God's economy. God, in the Genesis story, creates the world out of nothing, puts plants and animals on it, and finally human beings. God gives the human beings responsibility for the world. They name the animals: they are to have dominion and stewardship for the creation... Nature is there for them. They are part of nature and they are, in a very real way, God's managing partners.

Over and over again the ancient hymns of God's people break into doxologies of praise and adoration.

"For the Lord is a great God
In his hand are the depths of the earth:
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his for he made it
for his hands formed the dry land." [Psalm 95]

"The Lord reigns: let the earth rejoice
let the many coastlands be glad." [Psalm 97]

Some of Jesus' most memorable images were drawn from the natural world which he deeply reverenced and loved. "Consider the lilies," he said one time, and, of course, "blessed are the meek, they shall inherit the earth."

And St. Paul - there is a wonderfully cosmic, universalistic dimension to Paul's thought. Jesus Christ, Paul proclaims, is not just the savior of humankind. Christ will put all things right, universally. The whole creation groans, waits, longs for its healing and redemption. At his biggest Paul sees all of history, including nature, moving toward fulfillment, reconciliation, redemption, and peace. In Paul's thought our reconciliation in Jesus Christ includes the healing of our relationship with the world.

Over the years this Biblical emphasis on the world as our home, the earth as the Lord's, the lovely, beloved creation as an expression of God's mercy and kindness, gave way to another set of ideas. The ancient Greeks differed fundamentally from this Hebraic view of the world. The Greeks thought the material world, the earth, the human body, the tangible world of nature, was inferior to the world of the spirit. It's called dualism and sometimes it sounds as if nature is a kind of punishment, human life a burden to be borne until we get our reward in the afterlife; and our bodies... obviously God made a big mistake when he made us sexual, so the truly righteous and holy will deny this basic part of our humanity, suggesting that sex is impure, maybe even dirty, to be engaged in only as a necessary evil. That is, I continue to discover, not far - theologically - from where a lot of people live.

Princeton Professor, Elaine Pagels, has written a wonderful book, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, in which she argues that early Christianity, largely under the influence of St. Augustine, took a disastrously wrong turn when it concluded that the world was evil and that religion was essentially otherworldly. Pagels argues that we are still neurotic about sex, suspicious of women and basically unconcerned about the earth because of this wrong turn.

For sure, the conservationists have been accusing Christians of not caring enough about this world, suggesting that we have interpreted God's commission to Adam and Eve to have dominion over the world as license to pillage, burn, pollute and exhaust. That always makes me defensive, but in my reading this week I bumped into a very distressing study done at Yale on basic attitudes about wildlife in American society that revealed that church people are less concerned about conserving habitats of threatened wildlife than non-church people. The more religious they are the less people care about the environment, the study showed. [See Knowledge, Affection & Basic Attitudes Toward Animals in American Society, Kellert & Berry, Yale University, 1980, U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service]

And so, instead of trying to wring out of government, industry and the consumer's economy some concession that we are in a lot of trouble, maybe the best thing we Christians can do is shed some theological light on the topic. Maybe instead of simply wringing our hands about our automobile emissions, we ought to look again at our oldest religious tradition and allow it to speak to our hearts... allow our theology to reconvert us.

Maybe we ought to look for the oldest tradition, layered over by the dualism of the Greeks, but still there in Scripture and in theology and in the church. We should get reacquainted with St. Francis of Assisi, for instance, whose writings show a "creation-centered" spirituality.

"Be praised then, my Lord God
In and through all your creatures,
Especially among them,

Through noble Brother Sun
By whom you light our day:
In his radiant splendid beauty
He reminds us, Lord, of you.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon
and all the stars:
You have made the sky shine in their lovely light.

In brother Wind be praised, my Lord
And in the air,
In clouds, in calm,
In all the weather moods that cherish life.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water...
And Brother Fire.

Through our dear Mother Earth be praised,
my Lord,
She feeds us, guides us, gives us plants,
bright flowers,
And all her fruits."

It comes as somewhat of a surprise to modern, western, urban Christians that you don't have to step out of the Judeo-Christian tradition to discover a creation-centered spirituality. But if you are willing to, you will discover that basic reverence for creation is shared by many traditions and it is precisely at that shared point that there is some hope for a different future.

The wise Native American Chief who wrote to President Pierce pleading on behalf of his tribal lands said, "Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist on the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people." [op. cit.]

"let the earth rejoice" cried the Psalmist,
"let the sea roar and all that fills it
let the earth exult,
Then shall the trees of the wood sing for joy."
[Psalm 96]

Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth."

Genesis is revolutionary. So says Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggemann. It portrays a creator God who governs from within creation, who turns over the management of the creation to one of the creatures. It portrays human beings who are responsible, who share with God the ongoing process of creating the world.

And that sounds like McKibben in The End of Nature. Near the end he turns philosophical about the ecological mess. "We as a race, turn out to be stronger than we expected, much stronger. In a sense we turn out to be God's equal or, at least, his rival - able to destroy creation." That's the down side. The up side is that God has created us for responsibility... we are part of nature as God planned for us to be... we are in charge of the Garden as we always have been... we are capable of destroying it and we are capable of living responsibly in it, nurturing it, loving it, even seeing God's love and mercy and grace in it.

Our Lord Jesus lived close to the world. He assumed its goodness. He used its beauty and its power as illustration.

Blessed are the meek, he said; they shall inherit the earth. The meek end up really owning it.

And who are they... the meek? The meek are the ones who are capable of reverence and awe and wonder and in that they do inherit, own and live in the earth thoroughly. The meek are the ones who know that life is a gift given new every morning.

Poetry helps us find words for a gratitude so simple, so meek, it is difficult to express...

e e cummings:

"i thank You God for most this amazing day:
for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky:
and for everything
which is natural which is infinite
which is yes."

The meek are capable of wonder that Brother Sun appeared again this morning, that the balance between oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide makes the air breathable again today. The meek are capable of delight in the sensuous earthiness of creation, the tastes, smells, touches, sounds sensations which contain the goodness of God.

Thus Gerard Manley Hopkins:

"Glory be to God for dappled things -
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow:
For rose-moles all in stipple upon
trout that swim...
With swift, slow: sweet, sour, adazzle, dim,
He fathers - forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise Him."

To be meek is to be capable of gratitude for oneself: for this utterly astonishing complexity of flesh and bones and nerves and organs - which somehow enjoys Bach, builds computers, climbs a mountain, makes love and sings hymns to God.

The ones who inherit the earth - the ones responsible for saving it, the ones wise and tough and passionate enough to preserve it - are the meek - the ones who are grateful.

Jesus Christ came into the world. At the very least that suggests that the world into which he came is a good and lovely place... and that, given half a chance, our dear Mother Earth will continue to feed our souls with her beauty and to provide for our children after us and their children too.

We do not inherit the earth from the past, someone said.

We borrow it from our children.

Blessed are the meek.

Amen.